

A final look at No. 12's NU legacy

You can love football. But football won't love you back.

In five years covering Nebraska, I've seen three primary players cross paths with that prophecy: Scott Frost, Frankie London and DeAngelo Evans.

A few were better for their clash with The Truth, which lurks just beyond the Red Sea roar, free athletic gear, opposite-sex attraction and training-table T-bones for dinner - that what you've been given can be taken away. It'll put you in a place where, eventually, the cameras shrink away, and you're left with you - what you are, what you've done and how that isn't good enough for anybody.

Frost managed to escape that fate by capturing a national title. Evans walked away; he'll need a fine NFL career to wash himself clean. And London, well, the rules just kept changing on him, like that spring when being the best-graded quarterback was only good enough for third string.

And somewhere in the middle of those three, on an island all his own: Bobby Newcombe.

A key catalyst to Frost's national title in the 1997 season. The sophomore who swiped the starting quarterback job from London in 1998 thanks to a 91-yard run in the spring game. The player who because of his ongoing quarterback battle with Eric Crouch one year later, ultimately shifted the team focus from the I-back - then Evans - to the quarterback, where it remains today.

Newcombe ended his regular-season career at Nebraska two weeks ago with two receptions on the Cornhuskers' final drive in a 34-32 win over Colorado.

He was on the receiving end of Crouch's final completion, clinching a realistic field-goal opportunity. It was a clutch sideline grab - a hop, catch, hop that you replay five years down the road when close NU wins grow in our appreciation.

In those same five years, Newcombe will grow as an interesting enigma; one look at that catch, and it'll seem strange he practically disappeared his senior season.

The casual fans look at NU's 2000 season in retrospect, and some will offer that Newcombe should have stayed at quarterback with Crouch, the runner, at wingback and returner. They'll tell you Crouch's one gear - go - plays much better at receiver than Newcombe's constantly shifting motor.

And they'll offer if Newcombe had just been allowed to pass, like Turner Gill used to, it may have all turned out differently. *If Billy Haafke had turned this way instead of that ... If the knee injury hadn't occurred ... If Frank Solich would have just let him grow into the offense ...*

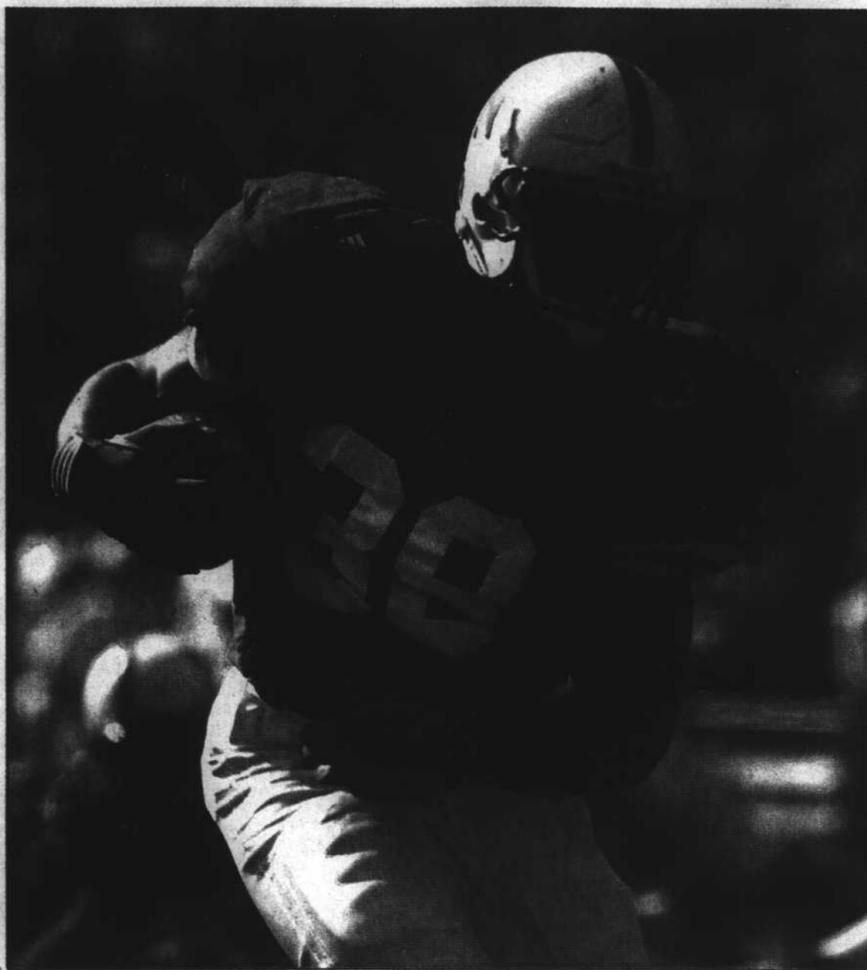
There's enough ifs out there to wager Newcombe got dealt a rotten hand and then drew an even worse hand at wingback, where he spent play after play being pointed at, shadowed, followed, and yet, more often than not, completely unused - window dressing.

His sporadic success over the past two years was almost a burden as stories were written and whispers of greatness were again shared with every good play. Newcombe's reputation traveled far past what his numbers suggest.

And there's a reason: We never really left Bobby Newcombe alone, even when we left him alone. At first it was hype, then controversy, then an extension of goodwill toward a successful career.

In the post-Tommie Frazier era, we see NU quarterbacks as icons, and the 91-yard run back in the spring of 1998 was iconic - the beginning of the next big

Battle of opposites at the Alamo



The Northwestern defense may have a tough time stopping Nebraska I-back Dan Alexander and the Husker rushing attack. NU rushes for 349 yards per game, first in the country, while the Wildcats rank 89th nationally in total defense.

BY DAVID DIEHL

One team has won at least nine games a season for 32 straight years. The other team won 15 games from 1987 to 1994.

Nebraska, college football's definition of consistency, and Northwestern, which found a football resurgence in the mid-'90s, square off in the 2000 Alamo Bowl in a meeting of teams with contrasting histories but similar strengths on the field.

The Dec. 30 game matches two of the nation's most potent offenses led by two of college football's most talented players. Northwestern running back Damien Anderson and Nebraska quarterback Eric Crouch, who were both considered Heisman Trophy candidates during the season, lead their respective offenses into the 7 p.m. game.

Nebraska Coach Frank Solich doesn't overlook the quality of the Northwestern program, a team once in ruins but now with a new life.

"They're a very fine football team," Solich said. "Their year came down to who was going to win the Big Ten conference race, and they were right in it to the end."

Northwestern tied Purdue (as well as Michigan) for the conference title, but the Boilermakers went to the Rose Bowl because they beat the Wildcats.

Much of Northwestern's success in posting its 8-3 record came on the heels of its offense, led by Anderson, who finished the season as the country's second leading rusher, averaging 174 yards a game. Anderson and quarterback Zak Kustok, who has thrown for 18 touchdowns, are the major cogs in the Wildcats offensive package

that ranks third in the country. "They have an offense that has been able to move the ball against everyone they've played," Solich said. "It'll be no small task to try and slow them down."

Nebraska may have the answers to the Wildcats' rushing attack, as it allows just 113 yards per game on the ground.

As the possibilities of a barn-burning offensive explosion loom, the game may come down to which defense stops the last drive, which is OK with rush end Kyle Vanden Bosch.

"That's what we want," said Vanden Bosch, whose 5½ sacks tie for the Nebraska team lead. "We want the pressure to be on the defense."

That may not be the best of circumstances for the Wildcats, however. Northwestern has allowed more than 40 points four times in 2000 and are allowing opponents 408 yards a game, 89th in the country.

Northwestern will be making its first bowl appearance since the 1997 Citrus Bowl, a 48-28 loss to Tennessee. Nebraska will be making its NCAA-record 32nd-consecutive bowl appearance. Neither team has been to the Alamo Bowl.

Despite going just 5-15 in the two years before this season, the Wildcats have flourished under second-year coach Randy Walker. He was named the conference's Coach of the Year and rewarded with a contract extension through 2007. Solich said he likes the matchup that Walker's squad poses.

"Northwestern is a great football team, and they've shown that with the teams they've beaten in the Big Ten," Solich said. "It'll be a challenge."

Seven Big 12 teams to play one more game

BY SAMUEL MCKEON

Two days after finishing his second season as Oklahoma coach without a blemish, Bob Stoops hadn't yet directed his attention to the national-title game against Florida State.

Sowing the seeds for future Sooners on a recruiting road trip took precedence.

But it took one question during Monday's final weekly Big 12 teleconference to get his mind on the Orange Bowl immediately - the early Las Vegas line, which put No. 1 OU as a 11-point underdog, the largest margin of any of the seven Big 12 teams in bowl games this season.

Suddenly Stoops, who spent much of the season drinking in the praise of national media and offering the same for his own troops, had to defend his team for the first of what will be many occasions before the Jan. 3 game.

And the fiery side of the Steve Spurrier disciple reared its head.

"We've been an underdog before this season," Stoops said. "We were an underdog against Texas; we were a nine-point underdog to Kansas State, and we went up there and won by 10."

"(Being an underdog) hasn't effected a whole lot to this point; why would it now? I don't pay attention to the odds-makers; they've been wrong most of the season."

Then Stoops tossed a slight jab at FSU (11-1), which nudged out Miami for the No. 2 spot in the Bowl Championship Series ratings, despite the Hurricanes' handing Florida State its one loss of the season.

"We haven't had to answer one question about being in that game," he said. "We've got respect."

Still, OU's perceived disadvantage in Miami, coupled with the Big 12's missing out on sending

Heading South for the Holidays

Seven Big 12 teams are in where they're going.



Delan Lonowski/DN

two teams to the BCS games had a grumbling effect for the conference. A win for the Sooners could equal a win for the Big 12; without it, relying on a number of well-matched contests among the other six teams will mark the conference's success in bowl season.

And after the Sooners' so-so performance in the last month of the season (Saturday's 27-24 win over Kansas State in the Big 12 title game likely represented their best performance in four games.) and FSU's bulldozer act through two top 10 opponents - Florida and Clemson - pundits have the Seminoles' speed being too much for OU to handle, especially their fleet of speedy defenders.

And then there's the experience factor. While Heisman Trophy candidate Josh Heupel quarterbacked Oklahoma in the obscure Independence Bowl, his main Heisman rival, Chris Weinke, won the national championship in the Sugar Bowl. Translate that to a whole team and its staff of coach-

es, and FSU has the distinct advantage.

"I imagine (the point spread) has something to do with the quality of the Florida State team," Kansas State Coach Bill Snyder said. "And they've been in this position a countless number of times."

Snyder drew upon his experience of two years ago - when his Wildcats lost a shot at the national title in the Big 12 championship game then dropped the Alamo Bowl to Purdue - as a sour memory he had no intention of repeating.

Citing that his 1998 team "didn't even want to play" after losing to Texas A&M in the title game, Snyder held an impromptu meeting directly after the Big 12 loss to OU Saturday to discuss KSU's bowl future. He gave his players two options: Commit right now regardless of bowl destination or call it a season.

Had K-State not shown proper enthusiasm, Snyder said he "probably would have" pulled the trigger on staying home from the

Please see BOWLS on 9



DN File Photo

Oklahoma quarterback Josh Heupel has led the Sooners to an undefeated regular season and a No. 1 ranking and now is one of four finalists for the Heisman Trophy.

OU's Heupel finalist for Heisman

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK - Three quarterbacks - Drew Brees of Purdue, Josh Heupel of Oklahoma and Chris Weinke of Florida State - and running back LaDainian Tomlinson of Texas Christian were announced Monday as finalists for the Heisman Trophy.

The award to the nation's best college football player will be presented by the Downtown Athletic Club on Saturday night.

The four finalists are the leading vote-getters in month-long balloting by 922 sportswriters, broadcasters and former Heisman winners. Balloting continues through Friday, but the finalists are well ahead of other contenders.

Brees, a finalist last year, is the Big Ten's career passing leader with 11,517 yards and led Purdue to the Rose Bowl for the first time since 1966. He threw for 3,393 yards this season with 24 touchdowns and 12 interceptions, and he also ran for 516 yards and five more touchdowns.

Heupel led Oklahoma to the No. 1 ranking in the country, completing 280 of 433 passes for 3,392 yards with 20 touchdowns and 14 interceptions.

He has at least one TD pass in all 24 of his career games at Oklahoma and has passed for more than 300 yards in 14 of them.

Weinke led the nation with 4,167 passing yards with 33 TD passes and 11 interceptions. He is 32-2 as a starter at Florida State with a streak of 25 consecutive victories.

He holds Atlantic Coast Conference records for passing yardage at 9,789 and touchdowns passing with 79. At 28, he would be the oldest Heisman winner.

Tomlinson led the nation in rushing for the second consecutive year and became only the seventh back in NCAA history to run for 2,000 yards in a season.

He carried 369 times for 2,158 yards, fourth highest in NCAA history, and 22 touchdowns. His 5,263 career yards is sixth highest in NCAA history.

Please see BOBBY on 9